

What did Jesus mean when he said the Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed? One of Jesus' intentions was almost certainly to say that His Kingdom, unlike the Kingdom of Rome, would not announce itself with military strength and subjugate its enemies; rather, His Kingdom would work from the inside of people's hearts, virtually unseen, like yeast, and grow into something gracious and powerful but quite unlike the other kingdoms of this world. The mustard is not a tall and mighty tree like an oak or cedar, but rather a fast-growing, slightly unwieldy, sprawling plant. Its seed was the smallest in common usage at the time of Jesus, and it certainly would not have been top of the list of impressive tree specimens in the minds of any keen gardeners or farmers who might have been listening.

There is an interesting history of trees that represent Kingdoms in the Bible. We all know, of course, that the story begins with trees in God's original Kingdom. The humans in Eden were tempted to eat from the forbidden tree out of a desire for control and power, which ultimately saw them sent out into a kingdom of wilderness. Later, Moses, following an encounter with God at a burning bush, led his people out of an oppressive kingdom into another wilderness, a place where mighty trees could not be cultivated or strong roots put down; the people of Israel had to shelter under whatever wild bushes and shrubs they could find. For a people that had spent much of their history wandering through the wilderness, a tree represented permanence and stability, and certainly many of Jesus' followers would be hoping for Jesus to establish a mighty cedar to rival the kingdom of Rome, and may have felt a little disappointed with the contrasting image of the unimpressive mustard.

It is in the major prophets of the Old Testament that we find the most helpful imagery to help us understand what Jesus was suggesting in today's passage. Jesus may be speaking a little tongue-in-cheek when he describes his Kingdom as the mustard seed, particularly in light of the passages he is echoing from the Jewish scriptures. In Daniel 4, King Nebuchadnezzar has a dream to do with a mighty tree that is brought down, and Daniel explains to him that it is his kingdom that is the tree that will ultimately fall. In Ezekiel, the prophet frequently uses the image of mighty trees that fall when prophesying about 'pagan' kingdoms. In chapter 31, Ezekiel refers to the Kingdom of Assyria as a mighty cedar, taller than the trees in Eden and more impressive, but ultimately destined for ruin. In chapter 17, Ezekiel draws a contrast between pagan kingdoms and the Kingdom of God. The tree-based language used to describe God's approach to establishing His Kingdom is clearly echoed in Jesus' own illustration to do with the mustard seed:

'I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a cedar and plant it; I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and

lofty mountain. On the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it; it will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches. All the trees of the field will know that I the Lord bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish.' (Ezekiel 17)

When read as a parallel to Jesus' own words about the nature of his mustard-seed Kingdom, we see that God's intention had always been to establish a Kingdom where the 'low tree' grows tall, sometimes referred to as the 'upside down' Kingdom, where the 'first are last, and the last first'. The echoes of the Ezekiel prophecy are clear in Jesus' own image – both passages include the Eden-like image of 'birds of every kind' sheltering under the branches. The Kingdom of God is not a Kingdom about subjugation or dominance, but it is a Kingdom to do with providing shelter and protection for all those who need it, just like the original design of the garden in Genesis 1.

The humorous difference, of course, between the Ezekiel image and the image in Matthew is that the cedar sapling has been changed to the mustard seed. Jesus really has taken the idea of the 'low tree' one step further – his Kingdom is now a mustard, rather than an off-shoot of a cedar. What can we say about this change? The image has become even more lowly, even more humble, and is of course a direct product of Jesus' own identity as the servant-king. If you are a follower of the servant-king, you are more mustard than cedar, because that is the way that this new Kingdom works. Jesus, of course, also fulfilled the prophesy in Ezekiel by being planted in a high place, hung upon a tree on a high hill above Jerusalem, stretching his arms wide so that 'birds of every kind', Jew and Gentile, might shelter under his branches and find healing and protection. The mustard is a fast-growing, low plant, and clearly Jesus is referring to the brevity and urgency of his salvation ministry; he is telling his people that it is not his intention to raise up an army and establish a mighty cedar on this earth, but rather gather together a disparate people and raise up a low, fast-growing, humble, mustard tree.

I do not know this morning whether you regard yourself as a mighty tree in this world, tall and strong and handsome, or rather a slightly unkempt, wild, twisty tree that might not be at the top of anyone's gardening wish-list. The good news of Jesus' Kingdom is that he is not interested in building a mighty cedar-kingdom that follows the pattern of this world; he has planted a mustard seed, an impossibly small, seemingly-insignificant, fast-growing and sprawling thing that grows well in the wilderness of this Earth. It might not be objectively handsome and impressive, but it does provide shelter from the heat of the day for 'birds of every kind', and that means you and me! We, the church, are a manifestation of the mustard-

tree, a sprawling, higgeldy-piggeldy, set of branches that grow well in wild soil, and ought to provide shelter for all who are lost and who seek the healing contained within the leaves.

The good news is that the story of the kingdom-tree does not end with the cross or with the mustard.

There is a further tree image that tells us that, although Jesus has planted a mustard tree Kingdom here on Earth, it is just a foretaste of the Kingdom to come. A tree has been planted that rises even higher than the cedars of Assyria or Egypt or Rome or America or Britain or China. There is a tree of life planted in the new Heaven and the new Earth quite unlike any tree of human cultivation; indeed, there has only ever been one tree like it, the one that first stood proudly in the Garden of Genesis, offering eternal and full life to the first humans. We read about this tree in Revelation 22:

'On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse.'

The mustard seed is only a foretaste of what is to come. It is merely a shadow of the new Kingdom that God has established. And because it is a mustard, we can be part of it, despite our wild, twisty, unkempt natures... but the mustard is not the end goal. As Christians and as the Church, we should try to grow as far and as wide as we can so that we can provide shelter for others who are lost in the wilderness, but we must not forget that the mustard itself is not the final design. There will come a day when we will be transformed, re-planted, and sitting under the tree of life, whose leaves of healing will be abundant, and, because of Jesus, 'no longer will there be any curse.'

Amen